

## **Pentecost Year A – Living Springs of Freedom**

**Acts 2.1-21 | John 7.37-39**

The festival Jesus and his disciples were celebrating in the reading we just heard was the Feast of Booths or Tabernacles. This festival recalls the period after ancient Israel's release from slavery in Egypt, when they lived in tents in the wilderness. The festival ritual in Jesus' time included water being carried from the Pool of Siloam to the Temple, symbolising the water that sprang from the rock in the desert, and God's deliverance and provision.

When Jesus stood up on the last day of the festival and "cried out, 'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink!'" he was proclaiming himself as the new rock from which life-giving water would flow, and he was naming himself as the new temple – the fulfilment of the hopes of Israel.

Deliverance wasn't complete for ancient Israel after they'd left Egypt. When they entered the land of promise, they couldn't leave behind the mistrust, fear and violence from their past. They'd been given the Law, the Ark of God's Presence, and guided through the wilderness. But their fundamental human problem remained.

Despite collective acts of sacrifice and repentance, and despite the festivals of remembrance of God's mighty acts of redemption, they were still incapable of living into their freedom without falling into corruption and taking on the oppressive and decadent ways of the surrounding nations. Chosen by God to be a blessing and a light, they were instead repeatedly occupied and exiled by foreign powers.

The longing for a Messiah involved the recurring questions: "How do we keep ending up here? Why are we continually subject to the forces of tyranny? Why do we keep becoming tyrants ourselves?"

God's answer to this problem wasn't to ride in on a battle horse and smite Israel's enemies, to overthrow occupation and set up the temple in Jerusalem as the new centre of global power. God's answer was, and is, the New Creation – a new way of being on the earth where, through the power of the Spirit, communities of hope are able to resist and subvert the powers of domination.

Through Jesus, God made a way where God's Spirit could spring forth from within the believer's heart – the living presence of God dwelling within and giving grace to live in God's ways from the inside out.

These things that happened to ancient Israel were real events. But the Scriptures don't operate just on this historical level. Israel is also a picture of the human predicament: a symbol of our slavery to our fears and inner violence, the experience of exile and estrangement. We struggle against the addictions and recurring habits that trouble us; our inner demons throw down the temples of prayer or righteousness we attempt to build, and take us captive against our will.

Jesus told a parable about an unclean spirit that, having gone out of a person, wanders through waterless regions looking for a resting place, but not finding any. It returns to its original host and finds "the house" empty – swept clean. Then that spirit "goes and brings seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and live there; and the last state of that person is worse than the first." (Luke 11.24-26)

Humans can't live in a state of emptiness. If we are going to reject evil and turn toward the good, we need to be filled with the waters of life and continue to drink from them. Otherwise our emptiness will turn on us. It's not freedom to simply get rid of what ails us, we need the presence of God and the power of God to turn our hearts and minds toward life.

Jesus Christ, on the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles, invited the thirsty to come and drink from himself. And, he promised that rivers of living water would also flow out from the heart (or viscera) of believers to become a source of healing for others. From within their own inner mess, their confusion and ache, a spring would burst forth uniting them to Jesus and renewing the earth and its people. John's narrator tells us that Jesus "said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive."

After his death and resurrection, Jesus told his disciples to wait for power from on high. They were gathered in prayer on another Jewish festival, the Feast of Pentecost, when the Spirit came. In Luke's telling, there is rushing wind, tongues of fire, and the sudden ecstatic proclamation of the good news in multiple languages. These are all ways of trying to describe the indescribable. Fire, water, and wind are symbols to show that suddenly the hearts of the believers were transformed, and they became the vessel of Christ's living presence on earth.

The Spirit gifted them with the ability to know and share the truth, to form communities of love and solidarity, to hear and speak the Word of God, to resist evil without violence, and to experience freedom from slavery to all kinds of inner and outer demons even during persecution and trial.

So what does that mean for us here today? I think it's fair to say that the worldwide church centuries on from those original disciples sometimes looks more like the struggle of ancient Israel than those first communities of the Spirit. But that's not the whole or the only story.

Through hundreds of years the Spirit of God has renewed and transformed the life of this world, giving rise to practices of compassion, hospitality and peace-making formerly unknown in the ancient world. It is from the Spirit's urging within us that we have developed the concept of equality, of human rights, of the emancipation of women and slaves, and the conviction that the poor and disabled should be recognised as human and treated with dignity.

It is from the living waters of the Spirit that we came to understand that God is love, that God lifts up the weak and the broken, and the church has been empowered to enact those convictions in community and social life. The Spirit has given Christians extraordinary courage to leave their homes and families and risk all in sharing the gospel.

This same Spirit is with us today, setting us free from our own personal and communal Egypts, and giving us the living water of Christ to drink. This same Spirit draws us deeper into love, empowering us to follow where God calls, so that the living water can flow to others who need to drink from Christ too.

In this century we are experiencing so many things that threaten our humanity and our sense of the sacred – which is all that can't be measured or bought and sold. Our technological advances and worship of money have made us divided, disconnected and lonely. No matter how insignificant we feel as a church community, through the power of the Spirit we can offer refuge and transformation to those who feel dehumanised by the times we live in through our presence and our love.

We need to keep returning to the spring of living water in our hearts, to receive anew the outpouring of the Spirit for the life of the world. And, from the overflow of this abundance we need to be prepared to offer life-giving water to others who need it. The spring that bubbles up within us isn't private, protected, just for us. It insists on being shared.

Can we become those who know how to find water in a parched and polluted world, and create an oasis of hope for those who thirst? This is the mission and agency of the Spirit. Let's pray to be drawn into that life-giving flow.

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